

William Hill's Iron Plantation  
by Louise Pettus

The discipline of landscape archaeology, a relatively recent field of study, is providing us with new and exciting findings that benefit students of history, geography and anthropology.

A local example of this integration of various fields of study can be found in work done on William Hill's Ironworks, an 18th century site on Allison Creek in York County. Hill operated an "iron plantation," a label used to describe the method of operating an iron-manufacturing enterprise that was primitive, but effective.

Before any iron could be produced, according to Terry A. Ferguson and Thomas A. Cowan, there had to be present: "iron ore, extensive hardwood forests, fast-flowing streams and rivers with numerous rapids and waterfalls, marble (metamorphosed limestone), and metamorphic crystalline rocks suitable for use as building stone."

On the eve of the American Revolution the S. C. General Assembly decided to encourage iron production by lending money to individuals who would build ironworks. In March of 1776 William Hill received 1000 pounds and in 1777 another 7000 pounds and gave Hill 10 years in which to repay the loan.

In 1778 Hill found a partner for the enterprise—Isaac Hayne of Charleston. Hill was to construct the furnace, forge and necessary buildings as well and manage the workers. He also would furnish the ore and the timber necessary to fire the furnaces. Hayne was to supply 40 slaves, provide for their maintenance, and share the cost of operating a farm to furnish food for the workers.

The York County furnace, named Aera, was the first In the State of South Carolina. In November of 1779, Hayne placed an ad in the Charleston Gazette announcing that the Aera Furnace was in operation and ready for both wholesale and retail trade in "Salt Pans, Pots of all sizes, Kettles...Skellets, Dutch Ovens...Stoves...and 2, 3, or 4 Pounders with Balls to suit...or any other castings in Iron...."

When the Revolution came to South Carolina and Charleston fell to the enemy in May 1780, the Hill Ironworks was already turning out cannon and cannon balls. In June Captain Huck led a British troop to York County and burned Hill's Ironworks, confiscating 90 slave laborers. In August the British hanged Isaac Hayne for breaking parole.

It was six years before Hill was able to acquire partners—Daniel Bourdeaux, Joseph Atkinson and Pierce Butler—and rebuild. Each of the partners had a one-fourth interest. The Aera furnace was rebuilt in 1787 and in 1793 the Aetna furnace was built.

The state of South Carolina tried to collect the early loans but Hill resisted, maintaining that the destruction of the ironworks by the enemy had negated the loan. When the state still demanded repayment, Hill tried to negotiate a deal in which he supplied all the weapons for the state's arsenal. The matter was never resolved.

Hill's Ironworks stayed in operation until around 1810. Hill died in 1816. Why did the Ironworks close? The timber situation was a major factor. Hill and various partners over the years owned over 10,000 acres but over a 30-year period most of the good timber was cut out and the cost of transportation increased. The quality of the iron ore lessened.

The iron minesites (there were 25 sites in South Carolina and 28 sites in North Carolina) were the earliest large-scale industry in the Carolinas. Four of the 53 sites were large enough to meet the archaeologists definition of iron plantations.

According to Ferguson and Cowan, William Hill's Ironworks in York County was one of the 4 sites because it had the following qualities: (1) a large land holding; (2) centralized control by the owners; (3) a specialized industrial production, and (4) a distinct division of labor with management in the hands of ironmasters.